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***JOINT MIGRATION OPERATIONS:  
A GROWING MISSION AREA***

by

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A paper submitted to the faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Department of Joint Military Operations.

The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College, the United States Coast Guard or the Department of Navy.

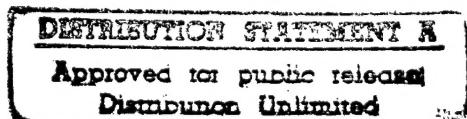
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## Abstract

As world population continues to climb, so has the number of people who mass migrate or become refugees as the result of economic strife and conflict.

In 1960, there were 1.4 million refugees worldwide. In 1996, that number has grown to 25-30 million refugees, most of which are women and children.

The United States has committed its military and other resources to these humanitarian missions to avert catastrophic loss of life with increasing frequency. This paper explores the growing Joint mission area of migrant and refugee operations both as a single mission Joint Task Force (JTF) and as part of existing JTF Operations. Operation SEA SIGNAL (Cuban/Haitian mass migration), Operation PROVIDE COMFORT (Assistance to Northern Iraqi Kurds), and the Rwandan and Bosnia-Herzegovina refugee crises are examined using the Principles of Military Operations Other Than War (MOOTW) described in Joint Pub 3-07. The specific Joint Task Force organization used in SEA SIGNAL is described and critiqued.

Migrant/Refugee Operations are then broken down into common phases that will assist future planners. Finally, the paper examines lessons learned from the participating agencies and military organizations that should be relevant to all future migrant/refugee operations.

## **Mass Migration: A Growing Humanitarian Crisis**

In almost every conflict, or when economic and political conditions become intolerable, populations have sought to escape across national borders. In 1960, there were 1.4 million refugees worldwide. In 1996, the number had grown to 15 to 20 million refugees *and* approximately 25-30 million internally displaced civilians. Of these, 80% were women and children. This translates to approximately 1 out of every 120 persons in the world today is displaced because of war, economic or political strife or persecution.<sup>1</sup>

Mass migrations are also part of many present day, U.S. military operations. Examples include Operation SEA SIGNAL (Cuban and Haitian exodus in 1994), the Rwandan civil war, post Desert Storm Iraqi Kurd relief operations (PROVIDE COMFORT) and the current Bosnia-Herzegovina peace operations. In each of these operations, the U.S. military has found itself involved in providing/coordinating security, sustenance, and/or shelter to large migrant or refugee populations.

Because of the complexity of migrant or refugee relief operations, it is essential that they be conducted as specialized joint operations maximizing interagency cooperation, international participation and non-governmental organization contributions. Historically, these operations have been ad hoc and usually required a steep learning curve as the 'crisis' was unfolding. Because of the recent number of migrant/refugee operations, there now exists a body of data that can be used to quickly stand up or adapt an existing U.S. Joint Task Force (JTF) to a migrant or refugee crisis using Joint Doctrine.

This paper will examine recent mass migration and refugee operations<sup>2</sup> involving U.S. joint military forces and frame them in the context of Joint Doctrine. It is hoped that this will assist future planners by identifying important criteria to be used in planning and executing this increasingly frequent joint mission. Because Operation SEA SIGNAL was managed by a single-function Joint Task Force, it provides distinct organizational lessons for future operations and will be used as a pivotal case study to examine U.S. migrant/refugee operations.

## **Operation SEA SIGNAL**

*“Successful completion of this humanitarian endeavor was truly a feat of Herculean effort and remarkable testament to the skill, determination, and ingenuity of the U.S. military. The Operation (SEA SIGNAL) established a standard by which all future migrant operations will be measured. The lessons learned will be invaluable.”*

GEN John M. Shalikashvili

Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff<sup>3</sup>

In May 1994, a U.S. policy decision to screen Haitian migrants for refugee status aboard ships rather than immediately repatriate them to Haiti, caused a mass exodus of migrants towards the United States.<sup>4</sup> U.S. Coast Guard and Navy vessels interdicted and rescued migrants leaving the Haitian coast in overloaded and or unseaworthy crafts. Temporary

safe havens aboard leased ships soon became overwhelmed by the sheer number of migrants and a temporary camp at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba was set up. In August of 1994, Fidel Castro changed *his* internal policy and permitted Cubans to leave the island. His actions exacerbated the Haitian migrant crisis with the additional mass migration of thousands of Cuban refugees heading for the south coast of Florida. Both of these migrations were triggered by policy changes that appeared to signal a greater opportunity for immigration to the United States.

The United States responded to the mass migration crisis by creation of a single purpose Joint Task Force (JTF). It began when the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (CJCS) issued a planning order on 19 November 1992 for U.S. Atlantic Command (USACOM) to prepare for an impending Haitian mass migration. On 2 December 1992, USACOM issued its own planning order and on 21 January 1993, it published the SEA SIGNAL execution order. This order directed U.S. Naval vessels to support U.S. Coast Guard migrant interdiction operations. By June of 1993, migrants were being transported to the U.S. Naval Ship Comfort (a hospital ship anchored near Kingston, Jamaica for immigration screening and humanitarian care). Initial planning for Joint Task Force 160 began in February of 1994; on May 18, 1994, it became operational.<sup>5</sup> At the height of Operation SEA SIGNAL, JTF 160 was made up of over 8000 military personnel with over 50,000 migrants in the camps. It was an expensive operation that cost the United States over a half billion dollars in a two year period. (Strat Forum pg 3)

## **Migrant Operations as a Specialized Form of Military Operations Other Than War**

As a joint peace operation, Operation SEA SIGNAL, Operation PROVIDE COMFORT are typical of the kinds of operations (collectively described as **Military Operations Other Than War** or MOOTW) that the U.S. military finds itself increasingly involved in today.

Joint Publication 3-07 provides doctrinal guidance to plan for and conduct these operations.<sup>6</sup> Before examining specific organizational requirements of migrant or refugee operations, it is useful to first examine these operations using the principles of MOOTW from Joint Pub 3-07.

**Objective** - As with all military operations, there are strategic, operational and tactical objectives that must be identified (if possible) before beginning the operation. For most migrant operations, the strategic objective is to provide immediate humanitarian assistance during a crisis or to protect our borders against illegal immigration. The operational objective (which falls on the shoulders of the Joint Task Force commander) is orderly camp operation and transition assistance for migrants once a political solution is found. Tactical objectives include the myriad of tasks required to manage the camps on a day to day basis and crisis response.

Once U.S. forces are committed to migrant or refugee operations to accomplish a strategic objective, it is difficult to pull back unless the migrants/refugees are repatriated or resettled in a new country. Negotiating safe havens, immigration agreements and repatriation procedures can take months. Repatriation is complicated and often impossible

to arrange in the short term. However, it is even more difficult for most nations to assimilate thousands of refugees. SEA SIGNAL provides an example of the complexity of the repatriation-resettlement issue. In SEA SIGNAL, the United States had different policies for the Haitians and the Cubans. The majority of Cubans were able to immigrate to the U.S., whereas the Haitians were mostly repatriated. The Haitians were viewed as predominately economic refugees (or migrants), whereas the Cubans were seen as political refugees because the government of Cuba is totalitarian. In reality however, the vast majority of Cubans were economic refugees as well. In Rwanda and Bosnia-Herzegovina, there are refugees who are still displaced after years of effort by the international diplomatic community to resolve the crisis.

**Security** - There are two components to the principle of Security in MOOTW. First is the security of U.S. or coalition forces overseeing migrant camp operations. Most refugees and migrants are non-belligerent and are focused primarily on their own safety, food and shelter. They pose minimal risk to each other or to U.S. forces. However, if the camp conditions become intolerable or their situation drags on for several months, they may riot or attack the military personnel who oversee the camps. In November 1994, overflow Cuban migrants from Guantanamo Bay, rioted in Panama and injured several U.S. servicemen.<sup>7</sup> Secondly, the refugees must be protected from each other. Camp conditions are often crowded and migrant-on-migrant assaults occurred in every operation. When two or more factions were in a single camp, as with the Rwandan refugees, the risks are markedly greater. A system of discipline for migrants must be set up and a carefully

crafted set of Rules of Engagement (ROE) must be in place for U.S. forces to ensure a secure environment.

**Legitimacy** - Obtaining international or domestic (U.S.) legitimacy is seldom an issue in the early days of a migrant or refugee operation. These operations usually begin with human suffering that requires immediate assistance to prevent loss of life. Over time however, legitimacy begins to wane as U.S. interest decreases and sovereignty issues overlooked in the heat of the crisis begin to take center stage. This can be exacerbated with national “flip-flop” policy shifts or negative media attention (CNN effect). Adhering to the strategic objectives of the operation and carefully managing the media can go a long way in preserving legitimacy.

**Unity of Effort** - If you truly have “unity of effort”, the operation will be a success. Unity of effort means everyone working off the same sheet of music to accomplish the objective. This is difficult to achieve. Migrant or refugee operations are often complicated by nearby conflict. The operation may also include United Nations personnel, governmental organizations, non-governmental organizations, and possibly coalition partners in addition to U.S. military forces. In Operation PROVIDE COMFORT, there were fifty non-governmental relief organizations, several U.S. agencies, several coalition partners, a variety of U.S. military commands, and two Joint Task Force organizations. The operation was conducted in a potentially hostile environment and on foreign soil. Unity of effort was absolutely essential to the rapid response and minimization of risk to coalition

forces. Real involvement in planning and execution of the mission by all members of the operation is the key to success.<sup>8</sup>

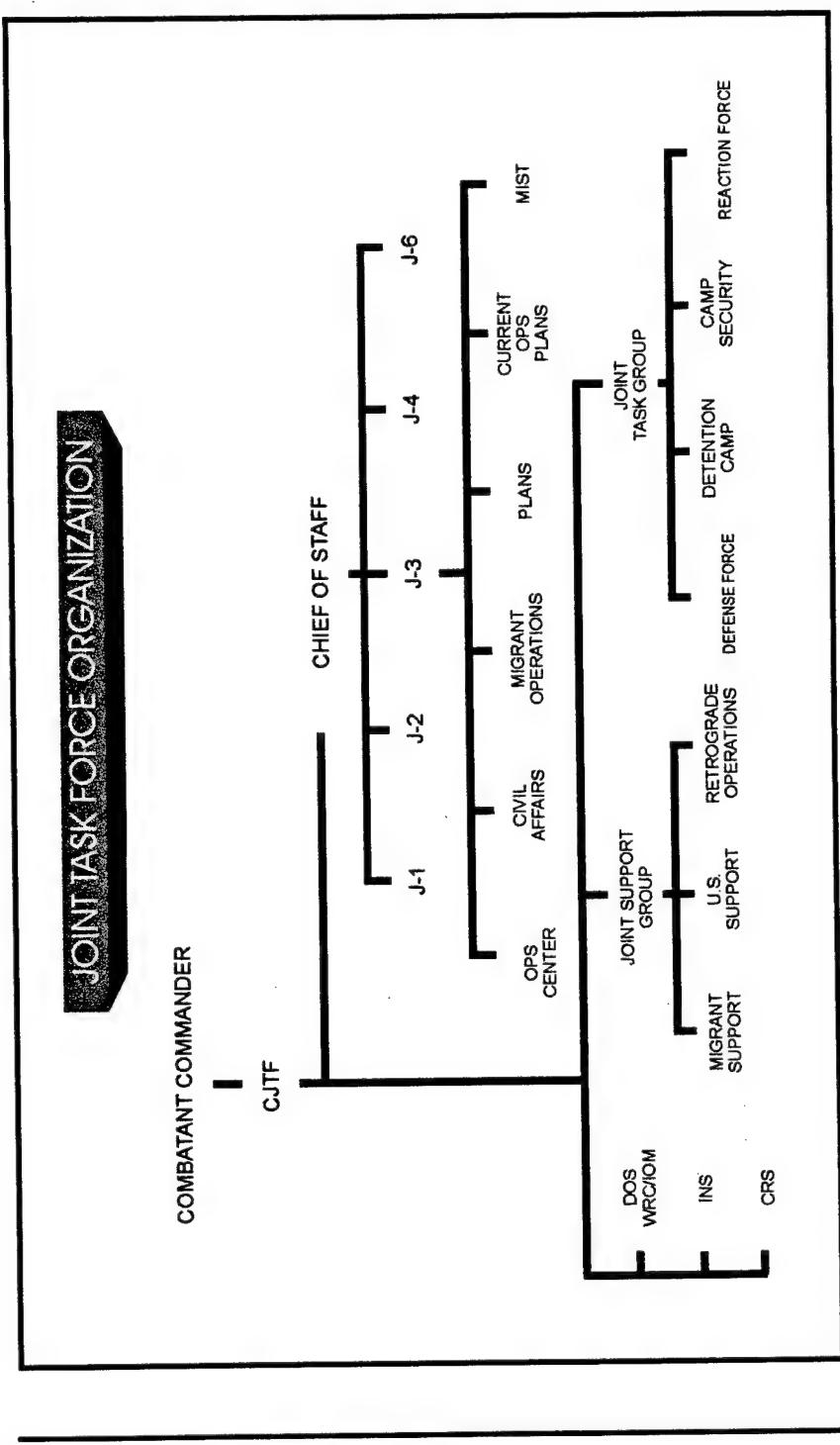
**Restraint** - The migrants or refugees are not enemy prisoners of war, despite their interment in camps. The key to their proper treatment is a set of Rules of Engagement (ROE) that incrementally increases force as the situation calls for it, yet always preserves the right of self-defense for U. S. forces. Excessive force to control or restrain a migrant will undoubtedly draw both domestic and international condemnation which will risk legitimacy and reduce support for the operation.

**Perseverance** - Perhaps more than any other MOOTW, migrant and refugee assistance operations are inextricably linked to political objectives and agendas. They are seldom resolved quickly and often require long range planning and strong determination by U.S. forces. As was the case in SEA SIGNAL, national policy shifts both created and ultimately ended the crisis. The frustrating aspect is that the military leadership has a difficult time influencing that policy and must simply endure the diplomatic ups and downs until a political solution is found. This requires exceptional military leadership to preserve the morale of the forces, especially as the operation runs for several months or years.

## **Using a Joint Task Force to Respond to a Migrant or Refugee Crisis**

The best organizational structure to respond to migrant or refugee crises is the Joint Task Force. The JTF is designed to achieve operational-level objectives and can coordinate air, land, and sea forces to project resources into the heart of the humanitarian emergency.<sup>9</sup> The operation can use a single purpose JTF structure or adapt from an existing JTF. In all of the recent refugee or migrant operations, the decision by the National Command Authority (NCA) to commit resources and respond was made only after the situation has assumed crisis proportions. Therefore, it is crucial that planning take place far in advance, because responsiveness is dependent on the time it takes to stand up the JTF or allocate resources from an existing JTF. Delays in providing assistance in a crisis may cost refugee lives.

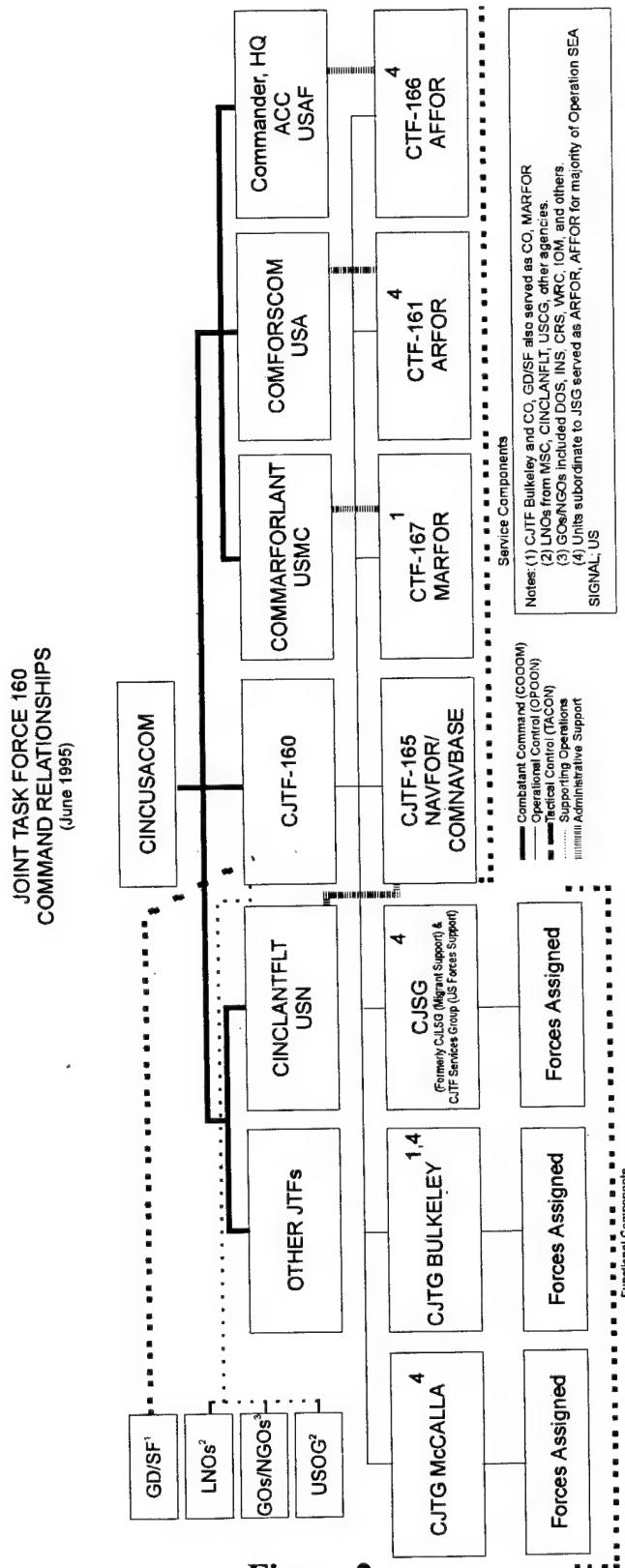
Figure one<sup>10</sup> represents JTF-160's (SEA SIGNAL) final functional organization. It evolved from a standard JTF organization as currently described in Joint Pub 5-00.2 (Procedures for Forming and Operating a Joint Task Force) into a mission specific migrant operation JTF. Figure two<sup>11</sup> shows the command relationships of JTF 160 as of June 1995, including the relationships of the service components and the functional components to the CJTF. Also in figure two, the Joint Task Group (JTG) was broken down further into forces assigned to the two main camps, McCalla and Bulkeley.



This was the final organizational structure for JTF 160.

**Figure 1.**

## JTF 160 ORGANIZATIONAL CHART



**Figure 2.**

The ability to modify a JTF organization to fit the operation is one of the strengths of the joint organization. In figure one, key organizations like Department of State (DOS), World Relief Corporation (WRC), International Organization for Migration (IOM), Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) and Community Relations Service (CRS) worked directly under the Commander, JTF-160 (CJTF). Specialty groups like the Joint Support Group (JSG) and the Joint Task Group (JTG) executed more specific tasking like logistics support and camp security.

In the case of an existing JTF that must respond to a migrant/refugee operation, the same functionality can be overlaid on an in-place JTF structure. Task Groups and Support Groups specific to migrant operations can be created or adapted from existing elements. New Private Volunteer Organizations (PVOs), Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and Governmental Organizations (GOs) must also be integrated into the operation.

The only recommended change for future operations was made by the JTF 160, J-3 (Operations) section. In a Joint Universal Lessons Learned System (JULLS) report, the CA section of the J-3 recommended the establishment of a Civil Military Operations Center (CMOC), rather than rely on the traditional J-3 CA structure.

According to Civil Affairs Doctrine (Joint Pub 3-57), a CMOC is the preferred organizational entity to act as a single source center for command and control of civilian organizations. Although USACOM's Tactics, Techniques, and Procedures for Migrant Camp Operations<sup>12</sup> permits the traditional J-3 CA structure, it did not meet the military or

civilian agencies' needs. JTF-160 (J-3 CA) felt that "coordination and deconfliction of activities of non-military organizations, including other Government organizations like the CRS were impeded because of the absence of a CMOC."<sup>13</sup>

GOs, NGOs and PVOs are critical components to any migrant operation. Organizations like the INS, CRS, International Red Cross (IRC), United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)<sup>14</sup> and the International Organization for Migrants (IOM) will ultimately assume long term responsibility for migrants after the military part of the operation has ended. It is imperative that they establish trust and credibility with the refugees in the initial phases of the operation so that a smooth transition can be effected when the migrants are resettled or repatriated. Furthermore, these organizations bring a substantial amount of resources like food, medicines, interpreters, educators, and care givers (especially for minor children) to the operation. Unfortunately, they also bring their organizational agendas to the meeting table. As recommended by JTF-160, the best place to assimilate them into the JTF organization and meet their needs without compromising security is through a CMOC.

### **Migrant Operation Phases**

SEA SIGNAL consisted of four phases that were dictated by the particular circumstances of that operation. Other operations have had different stated phases. As General Zinni said concerning complex humanitarian operations, "Each operation is DIFFERENT."<sup>15</sup>

However, if we look at recent migrant operations, certain phases are common to all.

Addressing these common phases during advance planning, will assist in managing resources as the operation progresses.

**Phase I: Rescue and Consolidation.** Rescue and Consolidation is the most time critical phase of the migrant operation. In SEA SIGNAL, the migrants were literally plucked from the sea and brought to safety. During RESTORE HOPE, the migrants had to be rescued from starvation, the elements and attack from Iraqi military forces. Consolidation is simply grouping the migrants or refugees together, so they can be fed, sheltered and protected efficiently.

**Phase II: Safe Haven.** Safe Haven is typically the longest phase. It is the process of building temporary camps, setting up logistic pipelines, providing medical care, accountability, creating a secure environment and providing all other living requirements for displaced population. These requirements usually increase as time goes on especially as quality of life issues become more important in the camps.

**Phase III: Repatriation and/or Resettlement.** Once the political (and often economic) solution is found, the migrants must be processed and transported to new homes or returned to their source country. Accountability and expeditious processing are the most critical elements this phase.

**Phase IV: Restoration.** When the camps are evacuated, all of the equipment must be packed up, shipped and stored. Accounts must be closed out. Operation personnel must be transported out. In Guantanamo Bay, the camp *sites* themselves were even returned to pre-SEA SIGNAL status.<sup>16</sup>

### **Migrant Operations Lessons Learned**

By reviewing the after-action reports of both military and civilian agencies, there were four common “lessons learned”, that will assist future planners.

1. The **Civil-Military** relationship is key to a successful migrant or refugee operation. Establishment of the CMOC in the first phase of the operation brings the civilian organizations into the game early and greatly smoothes the transition to subsequent phases. Unity of effort must be the primary principle of the operation.
2. Learn the **culture** of the migrants and structure camp life accordingly. Riots by migrants in SEA SIGNAL were partly attributed to the lack of understanding of the issues and frustrations facing the migrants. Use a Military Information Support Team (MIST) to monitor the “pulse” of the camps. The final Commander, JTF-160 went so far as to say, “the migrants’ quality of life and their sense of hope is the center of gravity for the operation, inversely proportional to the level of tension and security threat in the camps.”<sup>17</sup>

3. **Plan.** Identify safe haven sites as far in advance as possible. This will require work by the State Department and the United Nations. Stock and store common items for migrant operations. As an example, USACOM has developed the Land Based Contingency Kit (LBCK) which is a 2,500 person tent city that can be operational in 72 hours. It includes tents, portable latrines, security lighting and generator support.<sup>18</sup> Although the execution order may come at the peak of the crisis, planning for potential trouble spots can be done in advance. Since SEA SIGNAL, there have been two mass migration exercises. The most recent, Operation BLUE ADVANCE was a command post exercise that trained personnel on how to set up a JTF and provided Caribbean area familiarization for U.S. Southern Command personnel.<sup>19</sup>

4. There are both **direct and indirect costs** to the U.S. for these kinds of operations. First there is the obvious degradation of war fighting readiness for U.S. military forces. This can be partly offset by keeping tours of duty relatively short and conducting limited on-scene training. Another factor was burn-out among U.S. forces after 90-120 days during SEA SIGNAL. This occurred because of the “constant feeling of giving, of providing, and of helping people who seemed to always want more”.<sup>20</sup> More directly, there is the cost of actually running the operation. At its peak, SEA SIGNAL cost taxpayers over one million dollars a day. Supplemental funding should be identified early in the operation.

## **Future Trends and Challenges**

Given the significant monetary and human costs associated with mass migrations, it makes sense to address the root causes of this growing humanitarian crisis. Regional economic and political stability provide the best preventive solution for the problem of displaced populations. The old adage that says “an ounce of prevention is better than a pound of cure” seems relevant here. Early assistance to a nation on the verge of economic or political collapse may prevent a humanitarian crisis or mass migration, that in the end will be far more costly.

Military involvement will continue to be a cornerstone in mass migration or refugee emergencies. Only the military can rapidly respond to bring personnel, equipment, food, medicine and provide the security to execute a humanitarian mission amidst a crisis. As the “joint” concept becomes increasingly familiar to NGOs, GOs and PVOs and the international community, they will be in a position to reduce military involvement by operating more efficiently with the military and each other.

There are some challenges ahead. In June 1997, U.S. Southern Command (USSOUTHCOM) will take responsibility for the Caribbean area of operation (AOR) from USACOM.<sup>21</sup> There will undoubtedly be a learning curve as USSOUTHCOM gains familiarity with their new AOR. USSOUTHCOM will not be alone in handling migrant and refugee missions. With the upward trend of unstable populations, all of the Combatant Commanders increasingly deploy forces in response to refugee crises. The

African Continent, China, the region around Bosnia-Herzegovina, or even North/South Korea could all be potential mass migration areas requiring emergency humanitarian assistance. The post-Cold War environment has assumed a new complexity requiring broadened skills of our deployed military forces. The challenge in front of U.S. military leadership will be to execute these new missions with professionalism and efficiency, *without* allowing the war fighting skills to atrophy.

## Notes

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2. Ibid., 17-3,4. The terms *migrant* and *refugee* are often used interchangeably in the literature on this subject. The distinction goes beyond semantics and is based in historic legal definitions. A migrant leaves voluntarily, because of the “pull” of a better life elsewhere or the “push” of poor living conditions of their homeland. A refugee on the other hand, is one who flees involuntarily. Originally, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) defined a refugee as one who has a “well-founded” fear of persecution and flees as a consequence. Later, a broader definition has been adopted by most nations to include those who leave their homeland because of “external aggression, occupation, or foreign domination”. A new category exists now that includes those persons who remain within their nation’s borders but are displaced from their homes because of civil strife or nationality. The distinction between refugee and migrant is now more of a matter of degree. For purposes of this paper, the author will use the term that is predominately used in the historical data. For example, the Cubans and Haitians were generally referred to as migrants and the Kurds and Rwandans were called refugees. All four groups elicited a different response from the U.S. government, but all four groups were represented by the UNHCR. International law requires greater responsibility by cognizant nations for refugees than for migrants. Status determination (refugee or migrant) is important in determining immigration eligibility and was part of the screening process during Operation SEA SIGNAL.

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16. McKay, Exsum-6.
17. Ibid., Exsum-13.
18. Migrant Pamphlet, 30.

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